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Public Safety Guidance Note – Wheat Bags and Microwavable Personal Warmers

Wheat bags (microwavable personal warmers) are fabric covered products which are heated in a microwave oven and are marketed to give warmth or pain relief. Such products may be scented or unscented and are available in a variety of different styles and types. For example wheat filled products are available as pads, pillows, “hot bottles”, scarves, socks and “cuddly toys”.

As with any product involving heat there is a danger of fire and a risk of injury if not used properly.

Manufactured Wheat Bags

Wheat bags available in shops or from other commercial suppliers usually contain buckwheat which has a known moisture content. The known moisture content and the volume of the wheat bag enable the manufacturer to recommend safe heating times.

If users follow the manufacturers recommended heating times, it is unlikely that the wheat bag, will overheat, cause a fire, or injure the user.

Homemade Wheat Bags

Homemade wheat bags can pose a greater risk of fire and injury as the moisture content of the buckwheat and the volume of the bag is not known, therefore a safe heating time is not known. If other types of wheat are used as filling the risk of overheating fire and injury may increase

Adding Oils to Wheat Bags

Adding oils to wheat bags will over a period of time saturate the cloth covering. This may increase the risk of fire should the wheat bag become overheated.

Overheating and Fire Risks

Exceeding the manufactures recommended heating times may cause the wheat bag to overheat. In some cases the bag may overheat and ignition may occur. Continual heating of a wheat bag that has not been allowed to cool may have a similar effect.

Spontaneous Combustion

If a wheat bag is kept insulated after being heated, for example being placed under bedding, spontaneous combustion can occur and the wheat may catch fire. An indication of spontaneous ignition is if the temperature of the bag increases rather than decreases over time

Safety Advice

DO

- Buy bags with clear heating instructions.
- Follow manufacturer’s instructions.
- Buy bags with manufacturers contact details in case you have a problem.
- Only use a “heat pack” type wheat bags for direct application to the body
- Ensure the microwave turntable is working properly
- Watch for an “over use” smell e.g. a smell of charring or burning
- Leave to cool in a safe area on a non combustible area like a kitchen sink drainer.

DON'T

- Use a wheat bags as a bed warmers
- Overheat the wheat bag.
- Reheat the bag until it is completely cooled (which may take two hours)

- Leave the microwave unattended when heating
- Store the bag until it has cooled completely always check thoroughly
- Use the bag if you see evidence of problems e.g. discolouration or charring

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